

Testimony  
Submitted to the Education Committee

February 23, 2011

Governor's Bill No. 6385: An Act Implementing the Budget Recommendations of the  
Governor Concerning Education

Good afternoon Representative Fleishman, Senator Stillman and members of the Education Committee.

My name is Mary Grace Reed and I am Chair of the Farmington Board of Education. I have served on the Farmington Board of Education since 1991 and I am providing testimony today on behalf of the citizens of Farmington and the Farmington Board of Education.

Farmington has participated in Open Choice since its inception as Project Concern in the 1960's. Farmington is one of five school districts considered the early participants in Open Choice and we are proud of Farmington's 45 year commitment.

Currently we are providing an education for 81 students in the Open Choice program. That number was once over 110 students in the 1990's. For the past 45 years, the citizens of Farmington have voluntarily led efforts in educating Hartford students in a suburban setting. It is a fact that it has become a challenge to support additional seats for Open Choice students as our per pupil cost for education has increased and paradoxically the reimbursement for Open Choice students has remained static – meaning it has decreased. Like all school districts, we've faced very difficult budget years, particularly the last three budget years. To put that the last three budget years into perspective, Farmington has eliminated many programs; examples would be our entire Latin program, critical support tutors at the high school, a Culinary program that sent students to successful careers in the food service industry, the partial reduction of our Art and Music programs as well as increased class size in virtually every single academic area at Farmington High School. All reductions in education that the Board of Education and Superintendent were loathed to make.

We have reached a point ladies and gentleman where our long-term commitment to our Open Choice program has collided with finding the funds to protect the core of our educational program. When faced with this funding crisis, the number of seats we are able to offer to Open Choice students has absolutely been reduced.

With our per pupil spending at just over \$12,000 per student in Farmington, the \$2,500 per pupil reimbursement for Open Choice is wholly inadequate. Although Open Choice has been transformational for both the sending and receiving districts, underfunding the program has been institutionalized in the Legislature. It is truly baffling to those of us in districts that have maintained a stalwart commitment to Open Choice that we go begging annually to the state for appropriate funding, not to just maintain the Open Choice seats we commit to, but to do as we've done in the past and increase our seats. That goal has been rendered nearly impossible as a result of truly inadequate funding.

Farmington would like to see at a minimum the increased funding in the Governor's proposed education recommendations and again at a minimum the State Department of Education's proposed tiered funding formula based upon participation in the Open Choice program.

I can't urge you enough to support the \$500,000 proposed funding for academic support grants to school districts. This funding is essential for meeting the diverse needs of students participating in Open Choice.

We don't believe it is in the best interest of the Open Choice program to mandate participation. Farmington is proof of that. With the appropriation of additional funding, the proposed Crandall magnet schools would not be necessary.

Farmington has long been proud of the mutual commitment and shared benefits we receive - along with Hartford - in our participation in Project Concern/Open Choice programs. Choice is Farmington's commitment to both do the right thing and do the thing right. In supporting Open Choice, the State Legislature has done the right thing; please complete the circle - to do the thing right, you must properly and reasonably fund this program and allow us to keep our districts whole.

I sincerely thank you for your consideration.